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ABSTRACT

This brief paper summarizes a review of biennial performance reports filed by all 50 states concerning student performance goals and indicators required under the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It notes that the state reports varied extensively in level of detail, clarity of content, and type of supporting materials included. States also differed substantially in the number, type, and level of abstraction of state goals for special education. Sixteen states use the same goals for students receiving special education as for other children. The most common areas addressed in goals were academic achievement, transition/postsecondary placements, teacher preparation/technical assistance, graduation rates, dropout rates, and communication/coordination with families/communities. The number of performance indicators that states reported using varied from 5 to 71. The content of performance indicators clustered around eight topics including: reaching graduation standards, inclusion in general education curriculum and/or assessments, improved dropout rates, and higher academic achievement. Suggestions are also offered to enhance the readability and usefulness of such reports including development of consensus definitions of "goals" and "performance indicators" and use of a consistent format for reporting of basic information. (DB)

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Quick Turn Around Forum

QTA – A brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Performance Goals and Indicators

By Eileen M. Ahearn, Ph.D.

January 2001

INTRODUCTION

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require states to have goals and performance indicators as described in the following section of the regulations implementing IDEA:

§300.137 Performance goals and indicators.

The State must have on file with the Secretary information to demonstrate that the State—

(a) Has established goals for the performance of children with disabilities in the State that –

(1) Will promote the purposes of this part, as stated in §300.1; and

(2) Are consistent, to the maximum extent appropriate, with other goals and standards for all children established by the State;

(b) Has established performance indicators that the State will use to assess progress toward achieving those goals that, at a minimum, address the performance of children with disabilities on assessments, drop-out rates, and graduation rates;

(c) Every two years, will report to the Secretary and the public on the progress of the State, and of children with disabilities in the State, toward meeting the goals established under paragraph (a) of this section; and

(d) Based on its assessment of that progress, will revise its State improvement plan under subpart 1 of Part D of the Act as may be needed to improve its performance, if the State receives assistance under that subpart.

The U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) notified states that their report on goals and indicators would be included in a broader "Biennial Performance Report for Part B" due for the first time on December 31, 1999. The Biennial Report combines the existing requirement of a Performance Report on the use of federal funds with the new Part B requirement that states report on the progress of students with disabilities in meeting performance goals and indicators set by the state. The new report will now be submitted every other year.

In OSEP memo #00-05R in which the full content of the Biennial Report was described, states were asked to provide the following information related to goals and indicators:

1(a) State the goals the State has established for the performance of children with disabilities in the State and to what extent those goals are consistent with other goals and standards for children established by the State.

(b) State the performance indicators that the State will use to assess progress towards achieving those goals that, at a minimum, address the performance of children with disabilities on assessments, drop-out rates, and graduation rates.

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This QTA, completed as a task under Project FORUM's Cooperative Agreement with OSEP, is a brief analysis of the goals and indicators component of the first set of state biennial reports that cover the school years 1997-98 and 1998-99.

METHODOLOGY

OSEP provided to Project FORUM copies of the Biennial Performance Reports filed by all 50 states. Also provided were reports from six non-state jurisdictions that participate in the IDEA program.[1] The documents ranged in length from 4 to 558 pages, and all were at least basically organized around the requirements contained in the OSEP memo. The reports were reviewed and the sections containing the goals and indicators were tabulated and summarized to facilitate analysis. After general comments about the reports, this document contains a discussion of the areas included in the goals and indicators section of the reports, and concludes with observations about future biennial reports.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORTS

The state reports varied extensively not only in length as mentioned above, but also in level of detail, clarity of content, and type of supporting materials included. Although most began with a report organized around the specific points in the OSEP memo of instructions, 10 were incomplete and about the same number were difficult to analyze because of the way the material was presented. In some cases, state responses were compiled in whole or in part from existing materials on state or departmental goals and /or indicators that were developed for other purposes and reworked or revised to meet the needs of the biennial report.

States differed significantly in the level of specificity of their goals and number of goals and indicators. In some cases, goals were very detailed and were specified further with objectives and then linked to performance indicators. Others were very general, especially in those states that used the state goals for all students as the goals for special education. One state had three levels of goals, but performance indicators were not specified as such.

It was not unusual to find that what was listed as a goal in one state was a performance indicator in another. For example, one state had a goal of "making all schools safe," with performance indicators related to suspension and expulsion, while in another state, "reduction of the rate of suspension and expulsion for students with disabilities" was a goal, with specific percentages listed as the performance indicators. One state noted that its goals are voluntary and individual districts are free to adopt the state goals or to develop more rigorous ones of their own.

Most states included additional data in support of one or more of the items in the report. In addition to the required information on their activities and expenditures supported by IDEA Part B funds during the grant period, the materials appended by states included data on one or more of the following: state or district assessment, child count or identification rates, due process statistics covering complaints and due process hearings, suspensions/expulsions, graduation and dropout rates, needs assessments, and curriculum frameworks. The most common materials were student achievement results on the state assessment program, often with data on inclusion rates for students with disabilities and other information about participation. In some cases, there was little analysis or narrative interpretation of the test results, although many states did append a copy of their public reports that provided various levels of descriptive detail, some with results

[1] The non-state entities included in this analysis are American Samoa, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and Palau.

disaggregated by grade and/or other factors such as gender and race/ethnicity.

STATE GOALS

Since every state has designed its own accountability system, no specification for the type or content of the goals and performance indicators for special education was prescribed in the OSEP memo. As might be expected, there were substantial differences among states in the number, type, and level of abstraction of state goals for special education. Two states reported that they are still working on developing their goals and performance indicators, and a few others indicated that they will continue to refine theirs over time.

A total of 16 states are using the same goals for students receiving special education as they are for other children. Within that group, two states also use the same set of performance indicators, eight states isolated a subset of the state goals or developed performance indicators specific to students with disabilities, and six of those states did not provide any performance indicators. Some states developed their goals as part of other goal-setting requirements or built on to previously established goals—some in response to compliance monitoring findings, and others in relation to other federal programs such as the State Improvement Grant Program. One state described its goal-setting as clearly tied to its new quality assurance monitoring system.

Analysis of the content of the goals revealed a number of common topic areas and a few additional topics included by one or only a few states. The area most commonly included was academic achievement—the majority of states have one or more goals on this topic. The content of these goals specified achievement of high standards, levels of test results, inclusion/participation rates, and single or multiple goals directed toward curriculum. In a few states, academic achievement was the only area addressed in their goals.

The most common areas addressed in goals are listed below with the number of states in parentheses:

- Academic achievement (38);
- Transition/postsecondary placements (24);
- Teacher preparation/technical assistance (18);
- Graduation rates (17);
- Dropout rates (13); and,
- Communication or coordination with families/communities (12).

Other topic areas addressed in state goals by at least one but fewer than 10 states are: safety and discipline, suspension and expulsion, adequacy and use of resources, early childhood, interagency coordination, inclusion and access to the general education curriculum, compliance and monitoring, mediation, coordination with institutions of higher education, and interpersonal skill development.

PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The variability of state performance indicators is similar to that described for goals. States reported that they have adopted performance indicators that range in number from 5 to 71. Again "goals" in one state are "performance indicators" in another state.

The content of performance indicators clustered around eight major topics. The topics and the number of states that addressed them are as follows:

- Reaching graduation standards (36);
- Inclusion in general education curriculum and/or assessments (30);
- Improved dropout rates (28);
- Higher academic achievement (25);
- Improved transition and post-school outcomes (23);

- Lower suspension/expulsion rates (22);
- Better preservice/inservice for teachers and other personnel (16); and,
- Expanded communication/ coordination with families (14).

Other topic areas addressed in the performance indicators by fewer than 10 states are: disproportionality of race/ ethnicity in special education, attendance rates, decrease in the number of identified students with disabilities, early childhood/pre-school programs, monitoring, due process, mediation, extra-curricular activities, incarcerated youth, student-teacher ratios, and student-assistance teams. One state included a number of items related to health issues ranging from prenatal care to teenage concerns.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

States are at various levels of development in the area of performance goals and indicators for special education. Many states are simultaneously involved in projects to develop or significantly revise their state data system to accommodate the expanded need for accountability data at state and federal levels. It is reasonable to expect that goals and indicators will change in many states by the time the next biennial report is due.

The 1997-98/1998-99 reports that were more easily understood were organized as follows:

- A summary of IDEA implementation in the state incorporating the required data on Part B activities and expenditures;
- Presentation of each goal with its performance indicators including the baseline measurement and current progress information; and
- Concise student data with narrative explanation supporting the baseline and current status.

The analysis performed for this report indicated a need for consideration of the following suggestions that could enhance the readability and usefulness of future biennial reports:

- Develop consensus on definitions of "goals" and "performance indicators" as they pertain to special education programs within the constraints of their individual state requirements on this matter.
- Establish a consistent format for the reporting of basic information, and agreement on the type and amount of supporting data to be included in biennial reports to improve the usefulness of those reports in meeting federal requirements as well as facilitate communication and sharing among states.

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